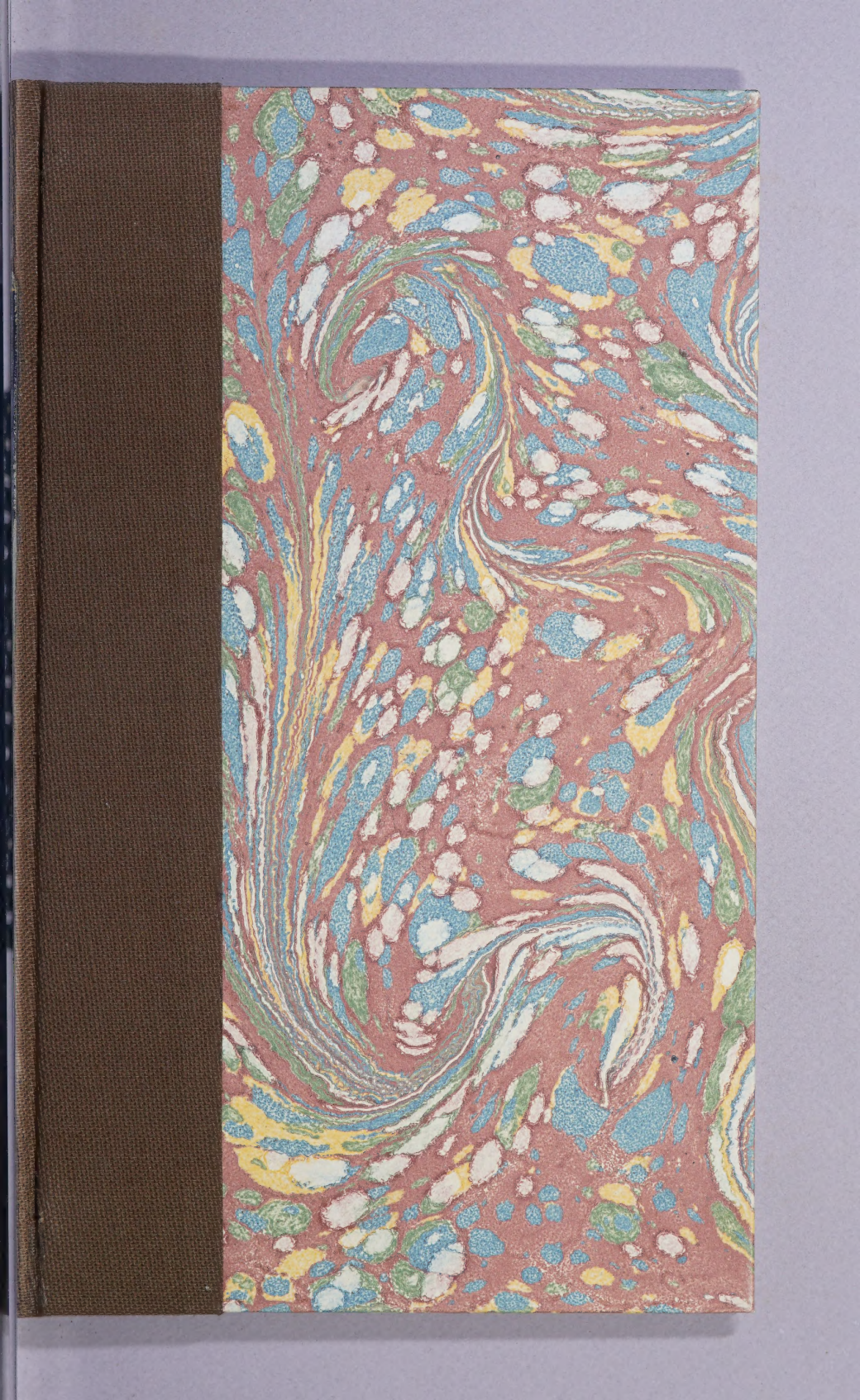

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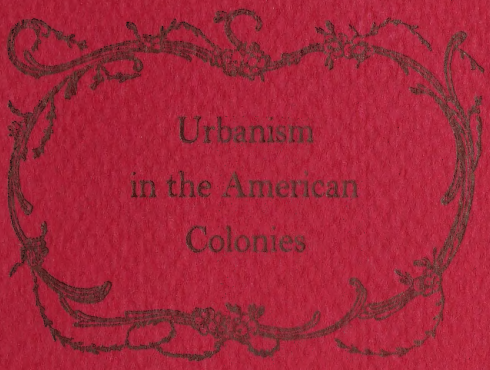
Urbanism
in the American
Colonies

Urbanism in the American Colonies

By John Nicholas Brown

Providence

The Associates of the John Carter Brown Library

1976

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WHEN the newly arrived colonists started to put up shelter for themselves in the wilderness of a New World, there arose immediately the question of the deployment of their little buildings. The first consideration was security, protection from the savage aborigines; and the second, storage for the common supplies of the little band. Only after that could the colonists construct houses for themselves.

The London Company, which organized and promoted the Jamestown Colony, issued clear instructions to their departing colonists on how to select a site – up a navigable river, on high and healthy ground – and once established ashore what to do about planning the new settlement, call it village or town as you will. They said:

> It were necessary that all your carpenters and other such like workmen about building do first build your storehouse and those other rooms of publick and necessary use before any house be set up for any private persons, yet let them all work together first for the company and then for private men.

The instructions also contained the following:

> And seeing order is at the same price with confusion it shall be advisably done to set your houses even and by a line, that your streets have a good breadth, and be carried square about your market place, and every street's end opening into it, that from thence with a few field pieces you may command every street throughout, which market place you may also fortify if you think it needful.

This sounds like Major L'Enfant's plan for Washington, D.C., with its circles and radiating avenues arranged so that

field pieces could fire down the avenues in case of riot or revolt.

The original triangular plan of Jamestown, unique so far as I know, did not last long. The James River flooded and the little settlement was destroyed. But with true British doggedness the colonists rebuilt and, although this first permanent English settlement in the New World must always be honored, it never took its place as one of the important cities of English America.

The plans of these new "Cities in the Wilderness," as Professor Bridenbaugh so aptly calls them, can be divided into three main classifications – the grid plan, the radial plan, and the long, narrow plan. Of course the terrain in each case determined the plan in large part. Here in Providence, for instance, Roger Williams on arrival from exile found a spring of fresh water beside a small river. The hill rose steeply behind. It was quite logical for Chad Brown, who surveyed the terrain and established the house lots, to run the line down along the course of the river, the Moshassuck. The little town was on a single street, the Towne Street then called, now called Main Street, and the lots ran eastward up the hill into the wilderness. But like so much else in Rhode Island this was exceptional, a different approach, a carefree approach, disregarding vistas and strictly straight lines.

In Rhode Island there were no London Proprietors to dictate how the towns should be built. The settlers were free to build as they thought best. In Philadelphia things were different. The long arm of London stretched to the banks of the Delaware. Having inherited from his father, the Admiral, a note of £16,000, owed by King Charles II, William Penn in 1681 was finally granted in exchange a Charter, making him

the Governor and Proprietor of a large tract of land which we now call Pennsylvania. Penn, who had taken an active part in the planning and reconstruction of London after the Great Fire of 1666, started work immediately after acquiring the Charter on drawing up plans for a capital city in this newly acquired property in the New World.

The three commissioners who accompanied the expedition, having selected the best site on the Delaware River for the city, were to lay out the town plan according to strict instructions:

> Be sure to settle the figure of the town [Penn wrote,] so as that the streets hereafter may be uniform down to the water from the country bounds; let the place for the storehouse be on the middle of the key, which will serve for market and statehouses, too. This may be ordered when I come, only let the houses built be in a line, or upon a line, as much as maybe. Let every house be placed, if the person pleases, in the middle of its plat as to the breadth way of it, that so there may be ground on each side for gardens or orchards, or fields, that it may be a green country town, which will never be burnt, and always be wholesome.

The plan which Penn devised for Philadelphia was basically a grid. When Penn arrived some months later, in October 1682, he ordered Captain Thomas Holme, a Commissioner in charge of planning, to increase the size of the city by extending the grid westwards, thus including land from the Delaware River to the Schuylkill River, a front on both rivers. Philadelphia was thus conceived from the first on a grand scale. There was to be a broad street running along the Delaware River and another along the Schuylkill. These acted as quays for the use of the shipping which would tie up and load and unload there. The city was planned in a formal grid pattern, each lot to be purchased by a settler who

would also acquire sizeable acres outside the city as his farm. This was a quite usual arrangement in nearly all the settlements. The city was to be divided into four quarters by two 100-foot-wide avenues at right angles to each other. At the intersection is a:

> Square of 10 acres; at each angle are to be Houses for Publick Affairs, as a Meeting-House, School-House, and several other Buildings for Public Concerns. There are also in each quarter of the city a square of eight acres, to be for like uses, and eight streets (besides the High Street), that run from Front to Front, and twenty streets (besides the Broad-street) that run cross the city, from side to side; all these streets are of fifty foot breadth.

Please look at the exhibit of material dealing with Philadelphia. There displayed is an example of the original Holme plan of 1683 of which I have just been speaking. Then the map of 1715 shows how the city had grown. You will see too the remarkable William Birch views of Philadelphia at the end of the century with its map of reference. Together they offer a truly breath-taking display of original documents of one of our major cities.

Philadelphia grew at an astonishing rate: it is estimated that in 1690 there were 4000 inhabitants; thirty years later, in 1720, there were 10,000. William Penn's venture proved profitable for him and his investors. The value of the land increased rapidly. But what concerns us tonight is the visual effect, the total view of a small and struggling community filling out a plan devised for it by men (Penn and Holme in this case) steeped in the latest European ideas of how best human beings could be brought together to live. The grid certainly was the simple, logical and efficient answer provided there were included sufficient open spaces for air and recreation.

I should like to emphasize the point that the Old World tried to direct the living habits of the New. Nearly all of the colonists left England under the auspices of a group of men, largely investors, who sought to assure success by laying out a detailed plan which the colonists were supposed to follow. We know this from many sources, none more vivid than the actual maps proposed by the English Company officials who tried to lure the colonists by means of showing them a beautiful plan of a city existing only in the imagination of the proprietors. I call your attention to the remarkable display in the back of the room to my left which has assembled four such maps. The first is of the Margravate of Azilia which Sir Robert Montgomery proposed in a little book printed in 1717 (we have two copies) entitled *A Discourse Concerning the Design'd Establishment of a New Colony to the South of Carolina in the Most Delightful Country of the Universe.* High praise indeed! The map shows a division of the Margravate. Note that Sir Robert proposed to enclose a fairly large tract with sufficient fortification so that the colonists need not fear for their safety in this New World. Needless to say, this scheme never came to fruition. But in the same general geographic area General Oglethorpe did establish Savannah, as shown in the map in the same case, a reproduction of which we saw on our invitations.

Also in the same case is a remarkable map of Halifax, Nova Scotia, the last colony to be founded. It dates from 1749 to 1750 and shows the usual grid configuration. It is interesting that while England itself had had no idea of town planning until the Great Fire destroyed most of the City of London, all these promoters suggested a logical, healthful grid reticulation for the proposed new cities in America.

In the same case lies a jewel all the more brilliant because it is new. Just before Tom Adams started putting up this remarkable exhibition he was offered a manuscript map dating from about 1760 entitled *A General Plan for laying out Towns and Townships in the New Acquired Lands in the East Indies, America and elsewhere.* It could not have joined the Library at a more propitious time. It summarized in a way all we have been thinking about, namely, the hand of London laid on the backs of the pioneers themselves. Here in essence are Azilia, Savannah and a host of other settlements laid down by the English in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

It is interesting likewise to remember that the Romans had precisely the same problem and found almost exactly the same answer. The armies of Rome as they swept over Europe established their fortified encampments, their *Castra.* These were much smaller, generally, than let us say Philadelphia. But they were all conceived on the same logical plan – four gates facing the four cardinal points of the compass, and wide (comparatively) streets leading from the gates to the central square. There the Temple raised high as a central symbol, with space and air around for markets and other gatherings. And finally four quadrants, each with its narrow streets where the different regiments were quartered.

From the very beginning of city building in America, the colonists lived in the town and besides their town lots were assigned farm land outside, as mentioned above. This reminds one of the European villages one sees today with the houses near together and the narrow strips of cultivated land outside. But in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century America the houses did not form a single face. This system came

about because of the need to huddle together for protection. From Jamestown and Plymouth on, this was the system. What differed from place to place was the concept of ownership. In New England the central space was the village green or common. This land was not owned by one or more of the town-lot owners. Here was the open space within the protective ring of palisade and fort, easily accessible to cattle in case of attack. The common, in New England, made an open center, a sort of *Plaza Major* for the inhabitants. It was there the Meeting House was situated. Thus it became the religious center of the village, as well as a place where the local militia could drill.

In reviewing these early settlements we see immediately the differences between the exigencies of life in an enclosed and protected habitat and the lone farm family living on its quarter section, 160 acres, in the Middle West. By the time the trans-Allegheny – Great Plains area was ready for occupation the Indian danger had been substantially reduced, thus allowing for separation. Neighbors could be seen, however, and it was not until the Western Great Plains became the great ranching country and was invaded by the nineteenth-century cattlemen that true family isolation came about.

We must turn back now and see how these early settlers built their towns. We have spoken of the grid-pattern towns. Let us look at the second, and smaller category, which used diagonal streets. The best example I know is Annapolis, the capital of Maryland. The town plan was greatly influenced by Governor Francis Nicholson, a remarkable man who in succession was Lieutenant-Governor of New York, Lieutenant-Governor of Virginia – where he planned the College of William and Mary at Williamsburg – then Governor of

Maryland in 1694, when we meet him at Annapolis; and finally back in Virginia, this time as Governor.

Nicholson was thoroughly familiar with the baroque conception of city planning then in vogue in Europe. He must have been familiar with the several plans for the rebuilding of London after the Great Fire, especially the idea of diagonal approaches to important buildings. Compare the glorious allées and vistas of French gardens like Versailles. He therefore planned two circles, a large one 500 feet in diameter which he designated the site of the Capitol and a smaller circle 300 feet across for the Anglican Church. From these two circles radiated the main streets. There was also a large square called Bloomsbury Square, designed to be a market place with dimensions of 100 feet to the side. Annapolis was a port, and shipping, especially tobacco, was important. So, from the high-point of the Capitol and the Church circles, streets went down to the excellent harbor. The lots for residences were rectangular and varied greatly in size.

With the creation of a baroque plan for Annapolis fresh in his mind, Governor Nicholson used his knowledge as soon as he moved down the Chesapeake as Governor of Virginia. Jamestown, the original settlement, and therefore the capital of the colony, was in sorry shape. The original choice was bad, due to the low-lying marshy land. Governor Nicholson without hesitation called an Assembly and urged the removal of the seat of government to the higher, dryer, healthier air of what was subsequently called Williamsburg. In 1699 the Virginia legislature passed the act which specified in great detail the plan of the new city. Undoubtedly Governor Nicholson is responsible for this overall plan as well as the detail. A great broad avenue, 99 feet wide and three quarters of a

mile long, was to run from the capitol building to the college. It was specified that on this street all houses were to be set back six feet and to "front alike." Half-acre lots were to be sold, but each purchaser was to build within two years. Since the terrain was flat Nicholson did not plan for circles; rather he envisaged his capital as a city of beautiful vistas. There is a market square midway along the great Duke of Gloucester Street and near it the Church (Bruton Parish Church), the Court House and the Magazine. But the grandest vista was to the Governor's Palace, set in gardens at the end of the palace green which was some 200 feet wide and 1000 feet long.

A year or so ago I visited again the superbly restored Williamsburg. I was struck by the openness of this city and the amount of greenery there was. William Penn would have been delighted. The houses, mostly in wood, had each their lawn and garden. There was a distinctly rural atmosphere. Compare this with our Northern cities where the buildings huddle against each other. Is it all due to climate?

But the close building together of structures allows for a uniformity of façade. This was a later development. I have called attention to the importance of open spaces, of squares. These are even more important when, unlike Williamsburg, the houses form one façade. It was the eighteenth century that developed the party wall. Witness the enchanting squares of London, or still later, the glory of Bath. It is unthinkable that these struggling settlers could rival their European prototypes, yet as the towns, particularly in the North, grew more and more crowded, the cityscape emerged rather than an emphasis on individual buildings. In our time we are seeing this

concept coming more and more into acceptance. Today we realize that preservation is no longer meant only for the individual masterpieces, but rather for the whole city ambiance. Fortunately those responsible for the remarkable work in preserving and restoring Annapolis have had this very much in mind. And likewise Charleston.

It is time now to look at some of the less predetermined city plans. New York, which one would automatically think of as a super grid, the epitome of the regular with its numbered avenues and streets, started quite differently. On the southern tip of Manhattan Island the Dutch built a fort. Although the plans have been lost the scholarly reconstruction shows a five-pointed star plan with the dwellings inside. The men back home – that is, the Governors of the Dutch West Indian Company – had drawn up careful instructions, but when the little band of settlers arrived they found the plan far too large and proceeded on their own as best they could. There was a great deal to be done. Protection must be of first importance so a small fort was erected. Then the fields were allotted and plowing, planting and harvesting proceeded lest the colony starve. There were negotiations with the aboriginal owners to be undertaken. So it was that Peter Minuit in 1626 made the greatest real estate deal in history, buying the whole island of Manhattan from the Indians for $24.

I wonder how much Mayor Beame would take to sell it back to the Indians?

The settlement grew, regardless of the neat plan ordained by the Dutch West India Company. Lower New York was laced with streets going in all directions, just like a mediaeval European town. Thus it was that in 1647 the Director Gene-

ral and Council issued an ordinance which reads in part as follows:

> [Because of] the disorderly manner ... in building and erecting houses, in extending lots far beyond their boundaries, in placing pig pens and privies on the public roads and streets, in neglecting the cultivation of granted lots, the Director General Petrus Stuyvesant and Council have deemed it advisable to decide upon the appointment of three surveyors ... whom we hereby authorize and empower, to condemn all improper and disorderly buildings, fences, palisades, post, rails, etc. Likewise we warn all and everybody, who may heretofore have been granted lots, that they erect on their lots good and convenient houses within 9 months ... or in default thereof such unimproved lots shall fall back to the Patroon or Landlord, to be given by him to such as he pleases.

Across the end of the island the Dutch built a wall to protect inhabitants. The street running along the wall inside they quite naturally called Wall Street. From the Fort ran a wide street north to the northern end of the island and this they called Broadway. It was so well established that when the British took over the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam in 1664 and imposed a grid pattern of streets and avenues which was to stretch over the rest of the island, Broadway still remained, cutting across the grid in a non-geometric way.

Boston remains to be noted as perhaps the supreme example on this continent of non-planning. I hesitate even to mention the subject because I see before me the author of the splendid book on the topography of Boston. With due apologies to my friend Walter Muir Whitehill, let me first point out two things. The sea, the indented coast and the three hills were the Givens when Governor John Winthrop moved the site of his Massachusetts Bay Colony across the Charles River from Charlestown to the peninsula connected to the

mainland by the narrow (and easily defensible) neck. The terrain called for a certain irregularity of streets and open spaces. Not only the proverbial cow but men also drew the lines for the street patterns. Nor were the narrow winding streets and lanes at all abhorrent to those early inhabitants. Many of them came from just such unhealthy surroundings. Indeed, compared to London before the Great Fire of 1666, the pure air of Boston must have seemed salubrious – that is, until the Northeasters blew.

I have spoken earlier of the New England village surrounding a common, a characteristic arrangement it would seem. But in Boston, the metropolis of New England – in fact Boston was the largest city in British North America until the middle of the eighteenth century, when it was exceeded by Philadelphia and New York – its Common came as a later addition to the town's amenities. The Common did not intrude itself in the middle of the town; rather it was placed outside, the other side of the three hills. It was still accessible and was doubtless much used, as were other commons, for recreation and for military drill. It found itself in a happy location when, later, the town was forced to expand up the Neck.

The plan of Boston was determined by the sea. The docks and all shipping facilities were paramount. So the indented coastline produced a cat's-cradle of streets, and as the coves and marshes were filled in to increase dock space and shipping facilities, the street patterns became even more confused. It was not until well into the nineteenth century, when the population had increased so that the old town could no longer contain the people, that the town spilled over the hill and eventually spread onto the filled-in land of the Back Bay.

Here the logic of the grid pattern took over and the later development beginning with streets arranged in alphabetical order was imposed upon the marshy, filled-in ground. Even so some of the great avenues could not be kept in bounds. Beacon Street, projected, insisted upon crossing Commonwealth Avenue.

It is interesting to note the expansion of population in American cities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. I have taken these figures from Professor Bridenbaugh's great book, *Cities in the Wilderness.*

In 1640 Boston had 1200 inhabitants as against 96 in Newport, and 400 in New Amsterdam.

By 1700 Boston had grown to 7000, Newport to 2600, New York to 5000, and Philadelphia to the same size.

But in 1742 there was a tremendous increase. Immigration had started in a big way. Boston, where there was an actual census taken, had grown to 16,258; Philadelphia to 13,000; New York to 11,000; and Newport to 6,200.

Antoinette Downing in her book on *The Architectural Heritage of Newport* calls attention to Newport's peculiar situation. Most New England towns, except Boston, were uni-religious, that is to say, the village green or common was dominated by the Meeting House or Church, usually Congregational. But Newport was different. There was no generally agreed-upon or state religion. Indeed Rhode Island was founded on the principle of religious freedom. Here there were churches and meeting houses of various denominations, including Jewish. The oldest synagogue in North America, by the way, is in Newport. In consequence the church edifice did not dominate the main square. Rather it was the Colony House. Furthermore, the harbor was the important

element. Once more it was shipping that dominated. Hence the wharves along the excellent, sheltered harbor. And the early requirement to increase shipping space brought about the filling in of the Cove and the building of Long Wharf.

From a city plan point of view there was a mild attempt to be logical, to make the streets into a comprehensible pattern. But the exigencies of terrain forced building in various modes. Broadway leaves the main square at an angle, Touro Street goes up the hill at another, and the two main north and south thoroughfares never stay strictly parallel, while the inter-connecting streets often end in a cul-de-sac.

There are many other examples of aggregations of people which we have not time to examine: the glory of the grid of Savannah with numerous small squares in one of which our own General Nathaniel Greene is buried; or Charleston, a superb port and one of the great port-cities of nineteenth-century North America with glorious architecture so beautifully preserved.

But rather than continue a catalogue, let me talk for the few minutes that are left about the visual effect that these urban settlements have had. We know from visiting foreigners that these cities were considered small and unimpressive. In New England the general, if not universal, building material for dwellings was wood. There houses, small for the most part, looked paltry compared to the glories of eighteenth-century Europe – yet each house set in its own yard had a character and proportion which, in the lush vegetation of, say, Virginia, prove most appealing. Brick was also used, more in the South than in the North, and nearly all important public buildings were so constructed. Here we see Providence again an exception. The First Baptist Meeting House

is, of course, of wood, even though it is inspired by a stone English original. However, some of our eighteenth-century visitors had a good word to say for our Colonial cities.

In Clermont-Crèvecoeur's journal, translated by my favorite historian in her book on *The American Campaigns of Rochambeau's Army*, the diarist says,

> The town of Newport could pass for a city, though there is nothing pretty about the town itself. Nearly all the houses are built of wood. Sometimes they build them outside the town and, when completed, put them on rollers and pull them to the lot on which they are to stand. Mostly these are very small houses, though it is not rare to see them move fairly large ones. The houses are charming, of simple architecture, and quite well planned for the convenience of each owner. The interiors are wonderfully clean, and the exteriors painted in different colors present a varied aspect that enhances one's pleasure. The Americans do not possess much furniture, barely enough for indispensable use. Everything is simple and so clean you can see your face in it.

Crèvecoeur's comments on Boston are interesting too. He finds much to admire, including the Governor's Mansion then occupied by John Hancock. He says "I have rarely in my life seen such pretty private houses, in both the exterior architecture and the symmetry, comfort, and cleanliness that reign within. They are almost all built of wood and painted different colors, which lend a pleasing variety to the view."

I should like to make two comments on these quotations. First, Crèvecoeur passes over the public buildings with a cursory nod. What we today consider our great monuments, Trinity Church and the Colony House in Newport, the churches of Boston, even Independence Hall in Philadelphia, Crèvecoeur shrugs off. Those to a European must have seemed insignificant compared to the great public buildings

of Europe. On the other hand he praises the dwellings which indeed do compare favorably to the apartments in large establishments which men like Crèvecoeur had known.

I like to try to visualize the life of our forefathers and foremothers in the first days ashore on a new continent. I doubt if there are many of us here tonight who could endure the hardships and difficulties involved. Is it not quite understandable that the first consideration was security under the guard of the fort and behind wood palings? Certainly the subsequent behavior of the Indians, excusable as it may seem to us as we sit comfortably in our houses with central heating, running water and television, could not but induce fear which in turn led to the close association of the city.

But as these small communities grew, so did the inevitable problems of urbanism. The organization for protection led to the organization for other human wants, those same wants we have today – police and fire protection, the proper paving of streets (a later development), the care of the sick (note the Hospital in Philadelphia, founded in 1751, the great building by Samuel Rhoads begun in 1755) – all these obligations of a communal sort which come about because many people insist upon living together. We must not forget that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the military played an important part. It was they who represented security, protection. Likewise the para-military constabulary, forebears of our police, who did patrol duty and kept the peace. And the church of whatever denomination carried with it a degree of authority, hard for us today to understand. In the Protestant North attendance at the Sunday Meetings and the listening to the endlessly long sermons were mandatory.

In the case of the smaller towns this led to a cohesiveness totally lacking today. It is symbolized as I have already pointed out in the village green with its white church pointing its spire to Heaven.

So far in this discussion I have not mentioned the great architectural monuments which these colonists succeeded in creating in their small cities either to the Glory of God or for the convenience of Government. The spires of the churches break the skyline as can be seen in numerous engravings of cities of this period. The inspiration is quite naturally English. Here were Englishmen transplanted to a New World. Where else would they turn? The new interest in architecture in London produced a series of books with engravings of either reconstructions of buildings of antiquity or with original designs by living architects. These buildings give the flavor to our towns. It is because of them that Independence Hall, Philadelphia, St. Michael's and St. Philip's in Charleston, the churches of Boston, and especially our own Baptist Meeting House, stand as the rallying points for those who braved the deep to establish themselves in a new and freer world.

We in Rhode Island can be especially proud that Peter Harrison, called the First American Architect, lived, worked, designed and built in Newport. The Redwood Library and the Brick Market – and in Boston, King's Chapel; and in Cambridge, Christ Church – mark a new neo-classical trend in American architecture. Peter Harrison could be called a true forerunner of Thomas Jefferson.

Urbanism connotes concerted effort. What is best for the whole is the ideal, subject of course to the inalienable rights of the individual and the minorities. In these English colonies

in the seventeenth century and eighteenth century we can watch the steady growth not toward unity but toward diversity and the inevitable clashes and conflicts which are inherent in growth itself. Urbanism was the only possible solution for the colonial beginning of our country. Are we witnessing today an overgrowth which by its very weight will fall apart and by a process of fission form itself into communities of more nearly human scale?

RENOWN

We gather about old Providence Plantation once again,
This time to praise the best of famous men;
For I've found throughout this isle, or town or gown,
The man whose name leads all the rest is Brown.

His, the head that lightly bears an Island's crown,
That ever wears that beloved smile, nor e'er a frown.
Year after year the sun's shone sparkling down
Along the long bright shadow cast by J. N. Brown,
Whose profile takes such a familiar jog
'Tis impossible for him to tread this terrestrial sphere incog.

If there's one friend whose grasp is warmer than another,
It's John Nicholas Brown, our gaunt and gothic brother.
The voice he hears, the call he answers to, is higher,
His light so shines, I suspect, with Promethean fire.

Since to cut a path through the thickets of this life
  is indeed essential,
So to have his constant inspiration in our van
  has been providential.

  God save our own John Brown!

ANDREW OLIVER

Toast delivered at the dinner preceding
the 33rd Annual Meeting of the
Associates of the John Carter Brown Library
23 April 1975

The speaker at the Thirty-third Annual Meeting of the Associates of The John Carter Brown Library on April 23, 1976, was John Nicholas Brown. In the year the United States entered its third century we deemed it appropriate to choose for our speaker the man who stands third in succession, following his grandfather and father, in the family which founded and built and have helped to continue the growth of the Library. That Mr. Brown reached 76 years of age in 1976 made our selection even more appropriate. Choosing as his topic a subject which has long interested him, he provided the assembled Associates with one of the most delightful and informative evenings within memory. We are happy to publish his remarks together with the toast offered by our former Chairman, Andrew Oliver.

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